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AUTHOR	Clark, Cynthia E.; Brill, Dale A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a model that merges corporate community relations strategy and public relations pedagogy to accelerate the rate at which Internet-based technologies are integrated into the public schools system. The model provides Internet-based training for a select group of Key Contacts drawn from two urban middle schools. Training is delivered by graduate students in Boston University's (Massachusetts) public relations program who have completed courses in the school's interactive media sequence. The Key Contacts are trained as change agents for their host schools and are provided with two mobile instruction units connected to the Internet using ISDN lines. The Key Contacts then conduct workshops, supported by continuous contact with the public relations graduate students, in their own schools and among their own teacher network. The model, known as the Boston University Public School Partnership (PSP), introduces a mutually beneficial relationship between a corporate sponsor (the NYNEX Foundation), public relations education, and public schools. This relationship serves to accelerate the rate of adoption of Internet-based instruction by middle school teachers while enhancing graduate students' real-world corporate community relations experiences. This paper is a starting-point for the PSP model which can be replicated in other universities. (Contains 28 references; two exhibits are appended.) (Author)

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Modeling Public School Partnerships: Merging Corporate and Community Issues

Submitted by

Cynthia E. Clark
Assistant Professor of Communication
Boston University

Dale A. Brill, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Communication
Boston University

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Abstract

This paper describes a model that merges corporate community relations strategy and public relations pedagogy to accelerate the rate at which internet-based technologies are integrated into the public schools system. The model provides internet-based training for a select group of Key Contacts drawn from a two urban middle schools. Training is delivered by graduate students in Boston University's public relations program who have completed courses in the school's interactive media sequence. The Key Contacts are trained as change agents for their host schools and are provided with two mobile instructional units connected to the internet using ISDN lines. The Key Contacts then conduct workshops, supported by continuous contact with the public relations graduate students, in their own schools and among their own teacher network. The model, known as the Boston University Public School Partnership (PSP), introduces a mutually beneficial relationship between a corporate sponsor (specifically the NYNEX Foundation), public relations education and public schools. This relationship serves to accelerate the rate of adoption of internet-based instruction by middle school teachers while enhancing graduate students' real-world corporate community relations experiences.

This paper is a starting point for the PSP model which can be replicated in other universities. The authors welcome the opportunity to discuss other aspects of the program after its roll out.

Public School Partnerships (PSPs)

The demand for graduates with technology-based skills increases the pressure on public relations programs to integrate computers and internet-based skills into their curricula. The battleground for recruitment is now being waged on the frontier of on-line communications. Therefore, reputation, success and even survival of many communications programs may hinge on the ability to keep pace with the changing digital environment. The question is not when, but how to integrate computer-based instruction into the public relations curriculum.

As end-users buying the "product" of the university curriculum, corporations demand employees who are educated and prepared to work in environments immersed in computer-based applications. These needs are pushing companies to look beyond monetary donations to affect change in university programs. Community relations has gone beyond "balloons and t-shirts" (Center for Corporate Community Relations, 1994) to involve the corporation's core competencies. Job-shadowing programs, internships, and high school classroom visits are part of partnership offerings between companies and public high schools. One such initiative, known as a School-to-Career Partnership, answers a call for such cooperative relationships specified by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Educational Reform Act of 1993.

The aforementioned cooperative relationships are not limited to corporations and universities. Corporations are equally involved with high schools and middle schools in response to the former's vested interest in the success of the latter. And, universities are expanding their relationships with secondary schools as well. For example, Boston University's contract to run the Chelsea Public School System was recently renewed to extend through the year 2003.

Summer enrichment programs exist across the country and are designed to bring high school students into the university setting. For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) high school program, known as SPLASH, offers a day of workshops for high school students to experience a variety of seminars held by MIT faculty. Other initiatives include the California Institute of Technology's SEED program, which began in 1986 by two Caltech faculty members seeking to improve science teaching in a local elementary school.

Murnane and Levy (1996) identify the ability to use personal computers as one of the six "new basic skills" required for persons to get a middle-class job. To be certain, any program that seeks to prepare students for performance in the workplace, or for study in the university, must solve two problems. The first is the lack of equipment. Where internet-based instruction is concerned, this translates into the need for computers and the connectivity to deliver the vast resources available on the internet. In Murnane and Levy's book, "Teaching the New Basic Skills," the authors point to the second problem hampering schools' ability to substantially improve the quality of instruction students receive: quality teacher training must come with the hardware and software. They cite the lack of follow through, the absence of outside reinforcement and the unrelated subject matter of in-service, or professional development days, as reasons that such efforts are ineffective in changing the substance of education in the classroom.

In a recent study of 900 public schools, the U.S. Department of Education found that just one in five teachers used advanced telecommunication in the classroom and only 13 percent of these public schools required teacher training. At the same time, public schools are faced with increasing enrollments, inability to raise residential taxes and a decrease in state and local funding (Zernike, 1996).

In the state of Massachusetts, as well as states across the country, public schools are required to complete a technology plan to secure their technology funds. Teachers who have limited exposure to the breadth of technology often write these plans.

So the current environment paints a picture in which corporations realize the need for greater community relations involvement in the surrounding school systems. Concurrently, universities seek innovative ways to integrate the technology with their community relations curricula; and public schools wrestle with how to best integrate technology into their programs with an emphasis on teacher training as a requisite to any meaningful use of hardware in the classroom. This paper describes a model that merges technology, public relations education and corporate community relations. Specifically, it details a technology-based community outreach grant submitted by Boston University's College of Communication (COM) to the NYNEX Foundation. The PSP is offered as a model for creating corporate-community alliances that improve public relations education while solving social issues. It details the necessary procedures from a university's initial approach to forming a corporate-community partnership to evaluating its effectiveness.

Conceptual Foundations

The academic foundations that give support to the PSP model are found in three primary areas: (1) business' role in society, (2) public relations pedagogy and (3) diffusion of innovations. These research streams form the basis for viewing the PSP as a means to enhancing the educational experience of public relations students and the basis on which to assume that the model is designed to maximize the likelihood of technology adoption by public school teachers.

Business and Society

The linkage between business and society is hardly a new concept. The two form an interactive social system wherein one influences the other. They are intertwined so completely that an action taken by one will inevitably affect the other (Post, 1996). It is through this constant interaction that the corporation develops stakeholders. Stakeholders are powerful groups that are affected by a corporation's actions. Stakeholders can also affect the actions of the corporation in return (Freeman, 1984; Post, 1996).

Public schools have become a primary stakeholder. Gaining widespread attention in the early 1980s with the publication of A Nation at Risk, the state of our public school system was under much scrutiny. Corporations realized that the public school system is a primary resource for its workforce. Therefore, business became increasingly involved in the process of educational reform.

School-business partnerships began in earnest with Adopt-A-School programs and teacher training projects. Society witnessed an increase in the number of business leaders sitting on school boards. The National Alliance of Business developed its "social compact" project whereby businesses pledged their support for local schools (Waddock, 1989, 1995). Not surprisingly, the number and amount of corporate contributions shot up during these years (Buenaventura, 1992).

The development of and changes in corporate-community relations function followed. Companies began to go beyond Internet Revenue Service guidelines for giving to social organizations. The corporate community relations (CCR) function evolved from a "collateral system with the corporation and the community in an exchange relationship, to an interpenetrating system relationship, where the two are less easily distinguishable" (Preston and Post, 1975).

Later, scholars began to look at public relations as being "better defined and practiced as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community" (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988; Hallahan, 1996). CCR has been redefined since as the "state of relations between the company and the communities (local, national or global) in which it has a presence or impact. It encompasses programs which advance the interest of both the company and its communities" (Burke, 1994). The CCR function now enables the corporation to achieve four long sought-after goals: to become the neighbor of choice, the investor of choice, the employer of choice and the supplier/provider of choice (CCCR, 1994). Corporations see that giving to society makes them competitive in these four areas. Coupled with the above-mentioned interest in cultivating quality public school education, a corporation is now able to choose the areas within society that it can mold.

Corporations now are selecting "core community concerns" with which to match their core competencies. The NYNEX Foundation, the corporate philanthropy arm of the telecommunications company, is concerned primarily with education through technology, neighborhood initiatives and teacher training. Digital Equipment's corporate contributions support education, health and leadership projects that provide opportunities for children to learn and thrive (Foundation and Corporate Grants Alert, 1996). The Ford Foundation is interested in aiding poor youths by empowering them through education (Lewis, 1996).

The National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), created in 1988, is a strong and recent example of the market for corporate and community initiatives. Armed this year with a $3 million budget, the group aims to teach approximately 3,500 young people how to read a balance sheet or write a business plan. The benefits are not just for the students but for the teachers who see opportunity in students where there was little recognition before (Lewis, 1996).

Each of these examples shows the evolution of CCR from a collateral system to an interpenetrating system relationship. Each organization sees itself using community relations to solve social ills within its particular area of competency. The Boston University Public School Partnership will illustrate this idea in a replicable model for application by universities and corporate sponsors across the country.

Public Relations Pedagogy

In recent years, many curricular discussions have been centered on increasing the number of management classes for public relations graduates (Van Slyke Turk, 1990; Grunig, 1993). While this is an integral part of the future of public relations education, the need for technology and business partnerships is even greater. The authors of this paper maintain that management skills can be realized through a student's participation in a business-technology-community alliance. The concept of business partnerships is not new. Calls for businesses to step in to help shape the knowledge base for public relations education is documented as well (Scribner, 1993; White, 1993; Post, 1996).

Yet, Waddock (1995) suggests an even stronger case for these alliances within the corporation. In considering the changes in CCR and its primary stakeholder, the employee, Waddock suggests that technology has empowered employees, challenged management and contributed to downsizing. This fundamental change in the workplace, she offers, requires a better educational system. "As a result, it is likely that education—both in the workplace and in schools, universities, and colleges—will continue to be an important issue for businesses, particularly given the increasing diversity of the future workforce compared to its present status."
Lastly, a relatively new teaching concept has emerged at the college level in the last three years called "service learning." Partly it is an outgrowth of the $40 million a year in federal funding provided by the National Community Service Act, which is also responsible for creating Americorps.

In a service learning environment, students take classes that integrate classroom instruction with community service. Students learn skills, such as marketing, technology or language, in the classroom and then put them into practice in the community. It is suggested that these students are better prepared for the workplace and are more sensitive to social inequities.

A survey conduct by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute found that "students who had participated in service work were much more likely to do volunteer work in the community, help others and socialize across ethnic and racial lines (Yemma, 1997). It is in this framework, in part, that the PSP model is fashioned.

Diffusion of Innovations

There is perhaps no better-developed research stream in social science than diffusion of innovation to give theoretical underpinnings to this model. The diffusion of innovation tradition includes several models, each focusing on a different view of the diffusion process. Of particular interest to this paper is network analysis, which identifies the communication structure and flows in a system by using interpersonal communication relationships as the units of analysis. For example, Allen (1970) and Brown and Utterback (1985) found unique communication patterns and roles in technical groups. Coleman (1966) studied the way in which interpersonal networks explained the nature of the diffusion process among physicians. A similar study of diffusion of computers among education administrators found interpersonal networks at the heart of diffusion (Kearns, 1992).

Insert Exhibit A Here

These studies indicate that most diffusion networks are homophilious, that is, the degree to which individuals who communicate are similar, particularly in socio-economic standing (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1964; Rogers, 1995). These close ties are naturally formed among intimate members of a group (e.g., intimate in terms of close work environment proximity) and are considered "strong ties." While the potential for networking to spread the adoption of an innovation is great, these systems are not sufficient since rarely will one member of a homophilious network have experiences that the other does not. Teachers working together in their schools create a homophilious network.

Homophilious networks such as those existing in a public school are often impacted by "weak-ties," those occasional contacts with members outside the network through which information about innovation passes (Granovetter, 1973 and 1982). New information penetrates a homophilious group from occasional contact with an outside entity and then is spread among the members of the homophilious group. Walker (1966) and Gray (1973) suggest that innovations can diffuse from organization to organization through inter organizational networks, similar to those described above for individuals.

The PSP model described in the next section recognizes the homophilious nature of the individual schools. It takes advantage of the acceleration of innovation resulting when individuals share common meanings and mutual understandings. The model infuses the initial innovation into the homophilious school networks via the strength of "weak network ties" with a respected, outside source.

The PSP Model

The Boston University Public School Partnership brings together the power of corporate sponsorship with the resources of the university to serve the needs of public schools seeking to integrate new technology into their curricula. The case is being built that such a relationship is mutually beneficial allowing each participant to achieve related and synergistic goals.

Replication of the PSP begins with the task of identifying a corporate sponsor with a commitment to community participation as well as one with a strong technology base. NYNEX emerged as a natural selection based on its demonstrating history of commitment to neighboring communities. The NYNEX Foundation Excellence in Education Program routinely provides funds for non-profit organizations such as universities. For the first time, however, it began offering funds to public schools targeting grades 7 through 12 in urban areas of Massachusetts and New York.

Perhaps more important, is the natural tie between NYNEX's core competencies in communication products and the skill sets to be nurtured through the PSP program. Through several exploratory conversations with NYNEX, it was discovered that the company is seeking initiatives that specifically use technology in collaboration with community service. Programs that could highlight connectivity products such as ISDN were of particular interest. Despite the convenient tie-in to product marketing goals, the strongest factor pointing to NYNEX as a likely corporate sponsor was the NYNEX Corporate Philanthropy mission: excellence in education. Any program teaching computer-based skills would simultaneously train future workers, indoctrinate future consumers, and contribute to NYNEX communities as a whole.

Insert Exhibit B Here

The next step required identifying two schools willing to participate. Criteria for candidate schools required a strong desire to use ISDN lines to integrate technology, recognized need for teacher training and an inability to procure sufficient financial assistance through traditional means. A partnership school must also be willing to form a partnership over the course of two school years. Schools were identified from areas where such a program might have maximum impact, specifically the two schools were selected from socio-economically-challenged communities: Brighton and Roxbury.

Two separate focus groups were held with teachers in these schools to determine their desire to participate in such a program and flush out areas of particular need for computer-based training. The meetings also served to identify potential change agents within the schools.

The program calls for four change agents, or Key Contacts, who will receive training at Boston University's Multimedia Development Lab over four consecutive weekend seminars. The Key Contacts will then return to their respective schools empowered to train their colleagues using the same curriculum. The training includes a workbook companion to guide the introduction of internet-based training in general research skills, social studies and science modules.

During the training, graduate students, who are enrolled in the public relations master's degree program and have completed requisite courses in interactive marketing communication and community relations, are assigned to each teacher as facilitators. These students will remain assigned to their respective schools to assist in training and adaptations necessary to the program.

In addition to the training, each school is equipped with two Macintosh computers with screen projector systems. These portable systems can be tied into ISDN connections placed in the schools for use during internet-based training. Both the continuous presence of graduate student assistants and the portable computer stations attempt to address problems stemming from the lack of follow through as noted by Murnane and Levy (1996).

This component of the model increased the university's enthusiasm to extend its faculty energy and resources for the project. Graduate students witness and participate in a community relation's effort tied to a company's core competencies and the bottom line. Students were also exposed to the value of community service and teacher training allowing them to gain sensitivity to the importance of social equity in access to information. This experience in practice supports the university's larger mission in preparing public relations professionals. First, public relations students need to be better prepared for the diverse workplace (Scribner 1993, White 1993, Post 1996, Waddock 1995). Second, the management and coordination responsibilities assigned to students gives them experience in real-world settings as noted by Van Slyke Turk (1990) and Grunig (1993).

The model employs the influence of Boston University as a change agent and "weak tie" to the homophilious networks in operation within each school. The Key Contacts, in turn, act as catalysts accelerating the speed of innovation adoption by the remaining members of the network.

It should be noted that the computer labs reflect the realization that training alone is insufficient to maximize the adoption of computer-based instruction. The equipment purchases for the schools are a necessary component to give teachers the opportunity to use their new skills. It is also in the corporate community relations effort to recognize the needs of the community. These urban communities are largely unable to secure computers on a permanent basis for student use. This model enables each Partnership School to keep the hardware and software after training is completed.

Evaluation

In the corporate-community alliance described in this model many areas of evaluation need to be considered. Given the pilot nature of the program, any broad implementation of the model depends on favorable assessment made by all three partners.

The Corporation

The corporation has a vested interest in how effectively its philanthropy dollars were spent. Recall that its goals were (1) to develop community relations programs tied to core competencies, (2) prepare future customers and employees in computer skills, (3) improve public perception of NYNEX's community involvement as meaningful and making a difference and (4) improve employees perception of the company's participation in local communities as meaningful (or making a difference). Evaluation from the sponsor's perspective requires that pre- and post-test instruments be developed to assess whether skill sets of the teachers and students changed to any significant degree as a result of the program. Additional attitudinal measures will serve to evaluate the degree to which the program improved internal and external perceptions related to NYNEX contributions to the surrounding communities.

The Schools

The schools will be looking at the effect the project has on a variety of its stakeholders: its teachers, its students and local and state administrators. Specifically, the use of Key Contacts and providing equipment hopes to accelerate the adoption rate of teachers throughout the Partnership Schools. In addition to the actual skill set evaluations described in the previous section, pre- and post-tests will measure any attitudinal shifts toward willingness and desire to integrate internet-based instruction school-wide. Sensitive to the problems experienced by Dewey's laboratory schools, this evaluation is conducted to uncover the teachers' perceptions related to the transferability of the internet methods to their daily environment (Murnane and Levy, 1996).

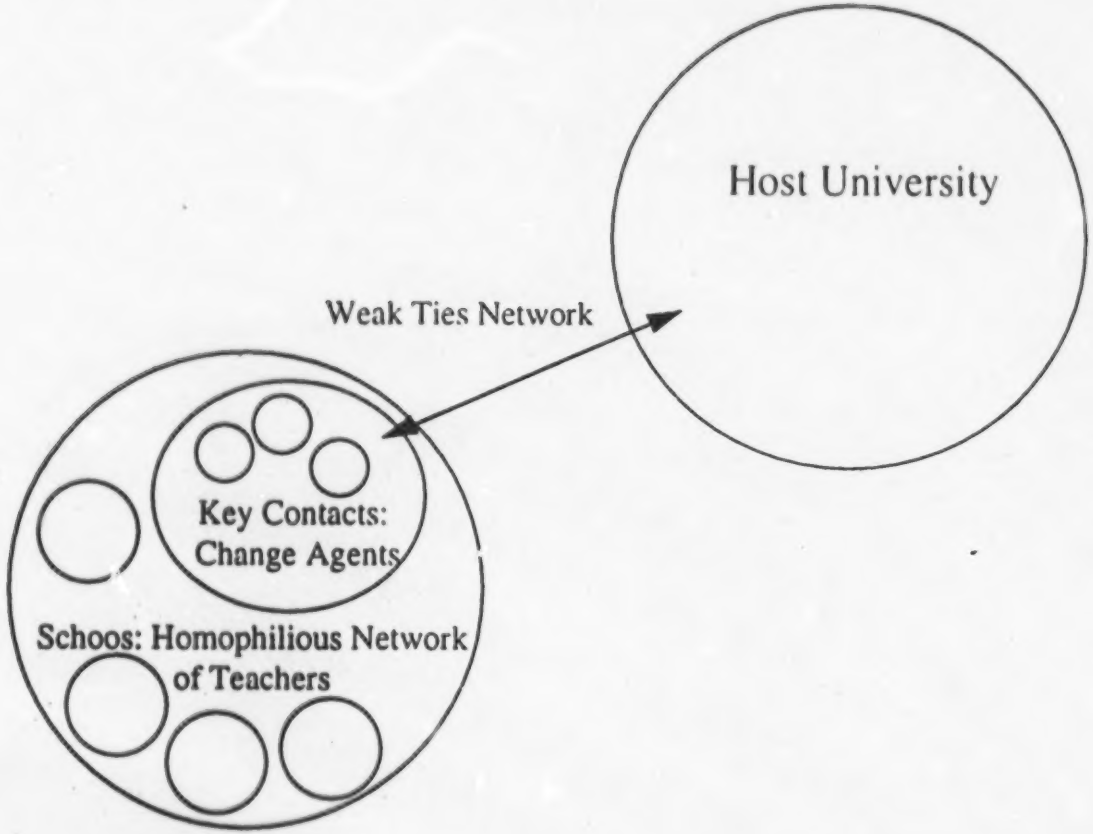
The University

Recall that the university's goals focused on enhancing the educational experience of its students. In addition to practical hands-on experience, the program seeks to impact students' attitudes toward corporate community involvement. It also seeks to determine the quality of preparedness among public relations students for the diverse workforce they will enter. Again, pre- and post-test evaluations will serve to mark attitudinal shifts in these areas.

Conclusion

By participating in Public School Partnerships based on integrating internet-based curricula into the public schools, corporations with core competencies in these diverse areas realize more strategically-oriented community relations outcomes. The corporation benefits from an educated customer base, product exposure and community goodwill. Concurrently, the university hosting the PSP integrates technology into its public relations training. Future public relations professionals experience first-hand the benefits of innovative community relations strategies. Most importantly, the synergy between the corporate and university relationship serves to accelerate the rate at which public schools can substantially integrate the internet into its classroom. The PSP model defines a mutually beneficial relationship between corporate sponsors, graduate public relations education and public schools.

Exhibit A: PSP as Weak Ties Network



Replication of the PSP Model

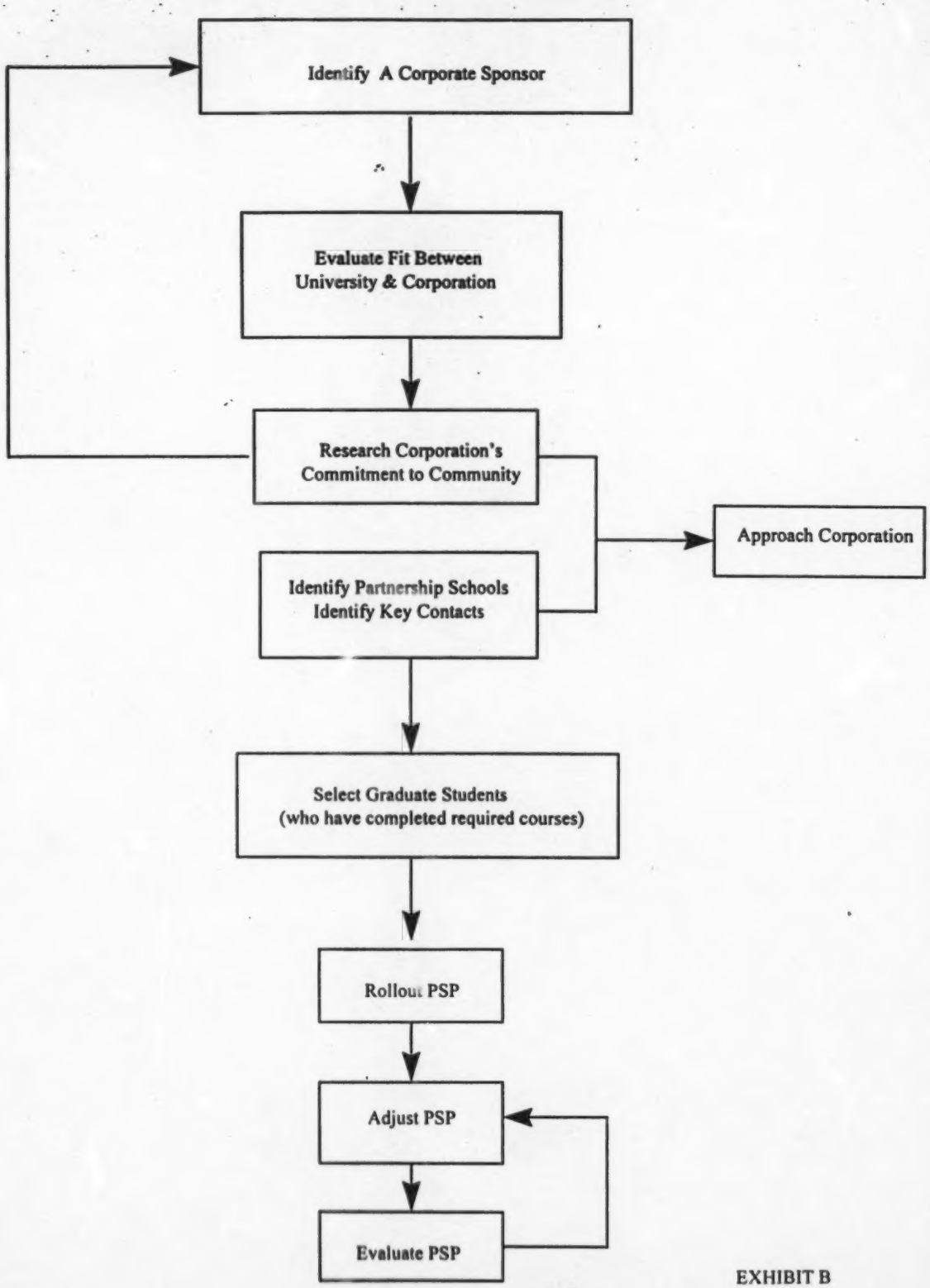

Identify A Corporate Sponsor
Evaluate Fit Between University & Corporation
Research Corporation's Commitment to Community
Approach Corporation
Identify Partnership Schools Identify Key Contacts
Select Graduate Students (who have completed required courses)
Rollout PSP
Adjust PSP
Evaluate PSP

EXHIBIT B

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